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***Basic biographical data***

<b>Name:</b>	Charles Curtiss
<b>Other names (by-names, pseud. etc.):</b>	C. ; Carlos ; C. Charles ; Carlos Cortes ; Charlie Curtiss ; Sam(uel) Kurtz ;
<b>Date and place of birth:</b>	July 4, 1908, Chicago, Ill. (USA)
<b>Date and place of death:</b>	December 20, 1993, Los Angeles, Cal. (USA)
<b>Nationality:</b>	USA
<b>Occupations, careers, etc.:</b>	Printer (lino-typist), political and union organizer
<b>Time of activity in Trotskyist movement:</b>	1928 - 1951

***Biographical sketch***

*This biographical sketch is chiefly based on those biographical sketches and obituaries which are listed in the last paragraph of the selected bibliography below.*

Born Sam(uel) Kurtz<sup>1</sup> as a son of immigrants from Poland in Chicago, Ill. on July 4, 1908, Charles (or, Charlie) Curtiss earned his living by various jobs as miner, sailor, etc. before becoming a printer (lino-typist). In Los Angeles he married Lillian Ilstien (1911-1985) in 1935 from whom he got a son, David (born 1943), and a daughter, Carolyn (1950-1993).

In 1928, Curtiss in Chicago joined the ranks of the *Communist League of America (CLA)*, an organization of left communists, chiefly expellees from the *Communist Party of the U.S.* because of 'Trotskyist deviationism'. Led by James P. Cannon, Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, the *CLA* soon became the American affiliate of the international Trotskyist movement which soon adopted the name *International Left Opposition*. As a skilled printer, Curtiss took responsibility for the production of *CLA's* weekly paper *The Militant*. In 1932, Curtiss was sent by the party leadership to Los Angeles, Cal., in order to help building a *CLA* branch there. Curtiss soon became one of the best known Trotskyists on the West Coast and was successful in recruiting a considerable number of young communists for the cause of Trotskyism. After the followers of Cannon and Shachtman had fused with those of Abraham J. Muste to form the *Workers Party (WP)*, Curtiss was elected to the new party's *National Committee* and strongly advocated Cannon's (and of course Trotsky's) orientation towards entryism into the *Socialist Party* of Norman Thomas. As a close confidant of Cannon and since he had been a successful party organizer and at the same time was very fluent in Spanish, he was sent to Mexico several times during the 1930s as a representative of the highly esteemed U.S. section and of the secretariat of the

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1) Sometimes also spelled *Kurz*

international Trotskyist movement, respectively. Thus from 1933 to 1934 he was engaged in the formation of a Mexican section of the Trotskyist *Movement for the Fourth International*; he also assisted the Mexican Trotskyists in setting up a print shop, producing a newspaper, leaflets and so on. His meaning for the development of Trotskyism in Mexico becomes evident by the fact, that the name *Curtiss* is mentioned several dozen times in the chapters about Mexican Trotskyism contained in two well-known reference works authored by Robert J. Alexander<sup>2</sup>.

When in 1937 new and severe differences among Trotsky's Mexican followers arose which probably would end in splitting and weakening the movement there, Trotsky<sup>3</sup> asked the American *SWP* leaders for help; following a visit to Mexico by *SWP* leaders James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman and Vincent R. Dunne in early 1938, Charles Curtiss again was sent by the *SWP* leadership to Mexico, as a representative of both the *Socialist Workers Party* and the *Pan-American-Pacific Bureau of the Movement for the Fourth International*, charged with the not easy task of reconstituting the troubled Mexican section and to bridge the differences and bring to an end the struggles among its leaders. Curtiss' negotiations lasted several months before the *Liga Comunista Internacionalista (LCI)* was eventually reconstituted in January 1939 and asked for official recognition as Mexican section of the *Fourth International* (officially proclaimed in September 1938). During this Mexican mission, Curtiss – who used to be called Carlos or Carlos Curtiss or simply comrade C. by the Mexican comrades – was also successful in establishing a considerable Trotskyist theoretical paper in Mexico which was named *Clave : tribuna marxista* (Key : a Marxist tribune)<sup>4</sup> and which to a certain degree could be regarded a very mouthpiece of Trotsky in Spanish language running from October 1938 to May 1941.

From June 1939 to August 1940, Charles Curtiss again lived in Mexico, joining Trotsky's secretarial staff while Curtiss' wife Lillian – also a devoted member of the *SWP* – from October 1938 to June 1939 served as secretary for Natal'ia Sedova, Trotsky's wife, and as English-language shorthand typist for Trotsky. Charles Curtiss at the same time functioned as Trotsky's primary link with the Mexican Trotskyists – it would have been illegally and unwise under the terms on which Trotsky was granted asylum in Mexico for Trotsky to maintain direct political contact with radical political movements in his host country. Last not least, Curtiss also tried to resolve personal and political differences between Trotsky and the famous Mexican artist Diego Rivera in whose 'blue house' the Trotskys had lived from 1937 to early 1939. When the fatal attempt at Trotsky's life, committed by GPU agent Jaime Ramon Mercader del Río Hernandez alias Frank Jacson occurred on August 20, 1940, Curtiss was not present at the house in Coyoacán. It is said, that some weeks earlier Curtiss, who considered Mercader odd and unreliable, had warned Trotsky.

After returning to Los Angeles, Charles Curtiss again earned his living as a printer and continued to be an indefatigable organizer and agitator. In the early 1940s, both Charles and Lillian Curtiss – who had sided with James P. Cannon in the factional struggle against the Burnham-Shachtman tendency – were transferred from Los Angeles to the New York headquarters of the *SWP*, where Charles was designated to replace James P. Cannon, who was put on trial<sup>5</sup>, as *SWP* National Secretary while Lillian took up a job as manager of *Pioneer Press*, *SWP's* publishing arm. But Charles couldn't take up the post because already before the Minneapolis defendants were sent to jail, he was drafted into the U.S. Army and

2) Alexander, Robert J.: *Trotskyism in Latin America*, Stanford, Cal., 1973, pp. 191-193, 195-196, 203-204, 212-213, 224, and Alexander, Robert J.: *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985*, Durham and London, 1991, pp. 609-610.

3) Trotsky had been granted asylum in Mexico in January 1937 and lived until his assassination in August 1940 as a political refugee in Coyoacán, a suburb of the Mexican capital Mexico City. For quite understandable reasons, Trotsky could not directly and personally intervene into Mexican political matters.

4) For some bibliographical details see TSB no. 0318 in our *Trotskyist Serials Bibliography* within the framework of the *Lubitz' TrotskyanaNet* website. See also Gall, Olivia: La revue *Clave*, in: *Cahiers Léon Trotsky* <TSB 0277>, 1982 (11), pp. 55-61 and Gall, Olivia: *Clave a tiempo*, in: *El Buscón*, 1985 (13), pp. 162-176.

5) In December 1941, James P. Cannon together and 17 other leaders of the *SWP* and the *Teamsters Union* were convicted and sentenced in the famous Minneapolis 'sedition' trial under the notorious anti-union and anti-communist *Smith Act* for their radical opposition to U.S. government policy during War.

sent as a GI to the Italian battlefield in 1943 where he experienced the horrors of war. It was there, too, that he met the English Trotskyist Charles van Gelderen who was on service in the British Army and was closely co-operating with Nicolo di Bartolomeo (Fossa) and other Trotskyists in the Italian resistance who were busy in building an Italian section of the *Fourth International* and setting up a newspaper, *Il Militante*. Later, van Gelderen remembered Curtiss providing funds for the fledgling organization by organizing vast quantities of American cigarettes which were sold by the Italian comrades on the black market. Curtiss was also very helpful with the printing of the just mentioned journal and other information and propaganda material.

After World War II, Charles Curtiss for some years continued his party work in the *SWP*. However, after having become disenchanted with the Trotskyist movement, critical of the party leadership in general and of Bolshevik-Leninist organizational principles in particular, he left the party in 1951 and joined the ranks of the reformist *Socialist Party (SP)*, nevertheless maintaining friendly relations with many of the old Trotskyist comrades, collaborating whenever possible. His wife Lillian, however, remained a member of the *SWP* until she was eventually expelled in 1984<sup>6</sup> in the wake of the Barnesite party cleansing<sup>7</sup>. Charles Curtiss until his death was active in the Los Angeles local branch and the *State Committee of the Socialist Party of California* and edited its national paper, *The Socialist* (Los Angeles), from 1985 to 1992; besides this, he was a union organizer and for many years functioned as a shop steward in the *Typographical Union*. He also actively took part in the protest movements against the Vietnam War and the First Gulf War.

Charles Curtiss died of a heart failure in Los Angeles on December 20, 1993. On January 23, 1994 a memorial meeting attended by some 100 people was held in Los Angeles to celebrate his life and work.

### *Selective bibliography*<sup>8</sup>

- ***Selective bibliography: Books, collections, journals, bulletins to which Curtiss contributed***

Fourth International (New York, NY, 1940-56) <TSB 0532>

Healy's big lie : the slander campaign against Joseph Hansen, George Novack, and the Fourth International. - New York, NY : Nat. Education Dept., Socialist Workers Party, 1976. - 87 pp. - (Education for socialists)

In memoriam Richard S. Fraser : an appreciation and selection of his work. - New York, NY : Prometheus Research Library, 1990. - 109 pp. - (Prometheus research series ; 3) [& later ed. - On pp.23-105: Documents by R.S. Fraser]

Internal Bulletin / Socialist Workers Party (New York, NY) <TSB 1548>

James P. Cannon as we knew him : by thirty-three comrades, friends, and relatives / introd. by Jack Barnes. Ed.

6) According to George Saunders and Kathleen O'Nan, "Lillian was put on trial, but the Barnes team announced that 'because of her historical role' - almost everyone in the Los Angeles branch loved her - they were going to make her an exception and not expel her. She wrote a statement rejecting this. She counted herself one of the 'honourable expellees'" (Saunders, George and Kathleen O'Nan: A founder of American Trotskyism dies in Los Angeles : a note on Charlie Curtiss, in: *In Defense of Marxism* <TSB 0616>, 12.1994 (2=113), p.24).

7) In the early 1980s, several hundred *SWP* 'veterans', loyal to the programme of Trotsky and the *Fourth International*, were either expelled or bureaucratically excluded from the party after they had got into a sharp conflict with the layer of younger party activists grouping around Jack Barnes, Larry Seigle, Mary-Alice Waters and others. These younger leaders had been recruited to the *SWP* in the wake of the student revolt and the Vietnam War resistance of the 1960s /1970s and successively had taken over the leadership from the retiring 'old guard' of party leaders. The 'Barnesites' soon became busy in substituting the traditional Trotskyist programme and political orientation of the *SWP* by a closer alignment to the Castroite Cuban communist line despite its partial adaptation to Stalinism. Thus they explicitly abandoned Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution and repudiated more or less the entire body of Trotskyist thought, thus challenging the very foundations of the *Fourth International*; all connections with the *FI* were officially ceased in 1990, but factually the *SWP* disaffiliated from the international Trotskyist movement already several years earlier.

8) TSB item numbers (e.g. <TSB 0716>) refer to Lubitz' *Trotskyist Serials Bibliography*, München [etc.] : Saur, 1993, which is out of print but [available as PDF file](#) within the framework of *Lubitz' TrotskyanaNet* website. In TSB you can find detailed descriptions concerning the respective Trotskyist journals, newsletters, bulletins and the like.

- by Les Evans. - New York, NY : Pathfinder Pr., 1976. - 288 pp. [Collection of obituaries, reminiscences and appraisals]
- Proceedings of the 112<sup>th</sup> convention of the International Typographical Union, Buffalo, New York, August 1-7, 1970 / comp. by Charles Curtiss. - Buffalo, NY : Allied Printing Trades Council, 1970. - [Various pag.]
- Quatrième Internationale (Paris etc., 1936- ) [ISSN 0771-0569 - ISSN 0765-1740] <TSB 1282>
- The Socialist (Los Angeles, Cal.) [ISSN 0884-6154]
- A tribute to George Breitman : writer, organizer, revolutionary / ed. by Naomi Allen and Sarah Lovell. - New York, NY : Fourth Internationalist Tendency, 1987. - 163 pp. [Obituaries, reminiscences and appraisals by some 50 individuals and some 14 organizations]

• **Selective bibliography: Books and articles about Curtiss**

- [Anon.]: Charles Curtiss (1908-93) / C.P., in: *Workers Press* <TSB 1858>, 1994 (392), p. 7. [Obituary]
- [Broué, Pierre ?]: Charles Curtiss alias Carlos, Carlos Cortes, Charles C. (1908-1993), in: *Cahiers Léon Trotsky* <TSB 0277>, 1994 (52), p. 128. [Obituary]
- Harer, Ruth: Charles Curtiss (1900 [sic!]-1993) / Ruth and Asher Harer, in: *Socialist Action* <TSB 1489> 12.1994 (2), p. 4. [Obituary]
- Lovell, Sarah: In memory of Charlie Curtiss / Sarah and Frank Lovell, in: *In Defense of Marxism* <TSB 0616> 12.1994 (3=114), p. 21. [Obituary]
- Lovell, Sarah: In memory of Charlie Curtiss (1908-1993) / Sarah and Frank Lovell, in: *Revolutionary labor socialist : the life, ideas, and comrades of Frank Lovell* / ed. by Paul Le Blanc and Thomas Barrett, Union City, NJ, 2000, pp. 323-326. [Obituary]
- O'Nan, Cathleen: Charles Curtiss, in: *Independent Politics*, 1995 (5), p. 31. [Obituary]
- Saunders, Georges: A founder of American Trotskyism dies in Los Angeles : a note on Charlie Curtiss / Georges Saunders and Cathleen O'Nan, in: *In Defense of Marxism* <TSB 0616>, 12.1994 (2=113), p. 24. [Obituary]
- Van Gelderen, Charles: Charlie Curtiss, in: *Socialist Action* <TSB 1489>, 12.1994 (3). [Obituary, letter]

*Note:* More informations about Charles Curtiss are likely to be found in some of the books, pamphlets, university works and articles listed in the relevant chapter(s) of the *Lubitz' Leon Trotsky Bibliography* [ISSN 2190-0183], e.g. in chapters [7.5.14](#) and [7.5.18](#).

## Notes on archives

Some archival material with regard to Charles Curtiss can be traced by browsing through the archives of renowned contemporaneous Trotskyists or through the archives of the *Socialist Workers Party*<sup>9</sup>.

A small collection is housed at the *Hoover Institution Archives* (Stanford, Cal.): the *Charles Curtiss Papers, 1938-1987* (one ms. box), containing correspondence, writings, notes, minutes, reports and some printed matter chiefly relating to the internal problems of the Mexican section of the *Fourth International* as well as to the troubled relations between Leon Trotsky and Diego Rivera at the end of the 1930s. The call no. of this small collection of papers is XX(4090025.1)

A considerable number of letters from and to Charles Curtiss<sup>10</sup> from the 1930s can be found within one of the most eminent Trotsky archival collections, the *Exile Papers of Lev Trotskii* (call phrase: *bMS Russ 13.1*), forming part of the famous *Trotsky Archives* housed at *Houghton Library*, Cambridge, Mass.<sup>11</sup> Documents within this collection relevant to Curtiss – including letters exchanged between Trotsky and him and so-called secretarial correspondence<sup>12</sup> as well as other documents (e.g. notes

9) For some details about those archival collections and for finding aids see the sub-chapter on *Public Archives : America* within the framework of our *Lubitz' TrotskyanaNet* website.

10) The collection contains some documents concerning Lillian Curtiss, too.

11) For details about this collection see the sub-chapter on *Public Archives : America* within the framework of our *Lubitz TrotskyanaNet* website.

12) "The secretarial correspondence is essentially an extension of Lev Trotskii's correspondence. Several of the letters, however,

about Curtiss' conversations with Diego Rivera) – are numbered: 711-714, 6258-6263, 7634-7640, 11141, 13835 -13837, 13959-13960, 14940, 14971, 14982, 15933-15935.

*Wolfgang and Petra Lubitz,  
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provide information on Trotsky's day to day life, particularly in Coyoacán, available nowhere else in the collection." (*The exile papers of Lev Trotsky*, vol. 2, Cambridge, Mass., The Houghton Library, 1975, p. 398.)